

Development Report

David Gadelkarim

2002308

Word Count: 3,000

Working Title: You are Here

You are Here is a game that was sparked from my fascination with exploring the unique opportunities for immersive narrative and novelty that's presented from digital mediums. This game sees the player control two characters simultaneously within a single space: a 2D character that does 2D platforming on the 3D objects in the space and a 3D 3rd person character. The 2D character would be controlled through the player's physical movement on a dance pad, while the 3D character would be controlled with a regular controller.

This is due to the different ways 2D and 3D games are viewed in terms of their link to reality. In 2D games, there is a lot of abstraction required from the player to link the events of the game to reality, due to the world of the game existing and moving on a fundamentally different plane to the player's reality. On the other hand, connecting events in a 3D game to reality is more seamless due to the reality of the 3D world aligning closer to the player's. With that in mind, in this game, the 2D player is the one that requires the player to move physically to control, while the 3D player is controlled through the traditional tool used to bridge the barrier between fictional game worlds and reality. Hence that would ideally rework the player's perceptions of 2D and 3D in terms of what they consider closer to being real.

Aims and Objectives

1. At the most surface level, I want to create a unique, novel and exciting new experience for players through the simultaneous control of 2D and 3D using physical movement and a controller at the same time.
2. In terms of the main task within the brief, the game should also be mechanically engaging, using the simultaneous 2D and 3D spaces to create environments that are interesting to navigate. To do this, I want to create a space that plays with the player's perspective, as well as requiring the player to simultaneously use the 3D and 2D players to explore that space.
3. The narrative I aspire to present is an abstract narrative centering on the subjectivity of reality in regards to art and fiction, and posing the question of whether art is an escape from reality, or simply an extension of your subjective perception and reality.

Inspirations

Initial Library Inspirations

- *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment (Second Edition)*

This book is a comprehensive dive into the role of interactivity in digital entertainment, its effects, and how best to utilize said interactivity as a creative. The following is stated in the section regarding video games, “They take you out of your ordinary life and give you a chance to do things you’d never be able to do in reality.” (Miller, 2020) That statement got me to think about how I view the barrier between player and fiction, and the personal conclusion I reached was that I disagreed with the hard separation most people place between the video game world and reality, as stated back in my introduction. Due to this, I made the decision to create a narrative that abstractly explores that divide in reality, and make it loose enough for players to reach their own conclusions on how they view the lines between the fictional reality and their reality.

- *Per Barclay speaks with Judicael Lavrador*

In this script of an interview between Norwegian artist Per Barclay, and an art critic by the name of Judicael Lavrador, there is a lot of interesting insight into Per Barclay’s approach to creating thought-provoking art. A rather minuscule part of the interview mentions a conscious effort to keep elements of artwork mysterious and highly open to interpretation. (Lavrador, 2008) In combination with the conclusion I reached when reading the book mentioned above, I thought to materialize the difference in opinion I had with the author in a narrative that’s highly open to interpretation.

With these two reads in mind, I made the decision to create a narrative that abstractly explores the divide in reality between the worlds of fiction and the physical world, while making it interpretable enough for players to reach their own conclusions on how they view the lines between the fictional reality and their reality.

Narrative Inspirations

The focus of my narrative inspirations is on works that explore the subjectivity of reality, as well as works that meld the realities of the fictional with that of the physical audience.

- *The Philosophy of Perception*

The Philosophy of Perception is a profoundly challenging read, meticulously exploring the subjectivity of our perception of reality, how that perception can exist, and the effects of its existence. Amongst many other things, what struck me the most about this book is the ideas it posits about perception dictating reality. It proposes the existential question of whether subjects exist to be perceived, or if our perception causes subjects to exist within our reality. Furthermore, it postulates the common philosophical view of “because my perception exists, I must exist in this world.” (Wiesing and Roth, 2016) This view of reality as subjectively dependant on perception is the perfect narrative resource for the idea that I aim to present with my game, making this an invaluable inspirational resource.

- *Before Your Eyes*

Before Your Eyes made for an experience that was exciting, new and novel, while using that novelty to craft a personal and emotionally resonant narrative, through its main hook of being controlled by the player's blinking. That mix of unique interesting methods of controlling the game, and using that novelty to craft a narrative that can't be done in any other way is the core crux of my aims for this project, hence why I found Before Your Eyes to be a truly exceptional inspiration as a blend of technology and narrative, in how to turn novelty into profound substance.

Aesthetic Inspirations

- *Thomas Was Alone*

Figure 1



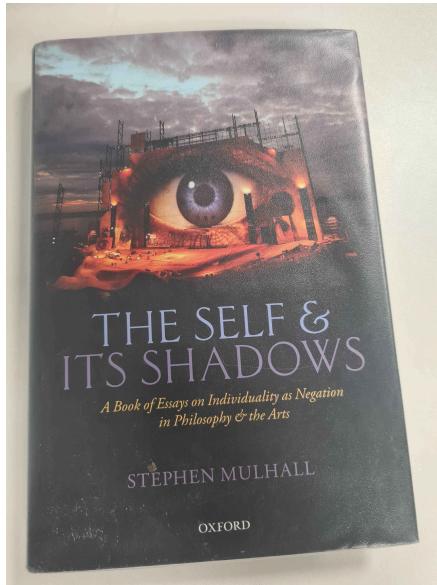
A screenshot I took from Thomas Was Alone

Bithell, M. (2012) *Thomas Was Alone*. [Video game]. Published by Bithell Games. PC.

Thomas Was Alone aesthetically consists of predominantly geometric shapes of different colors and sizes, centering the narrative around those shapes. This got me thinking about the abstraction of geometric shapes in games and digital media, and how the unreality of those shapes existing in solid form in any given environment is a very strict barrier between the internal reality of a game and our physical world. That gave me the idea of making the 3D space in my game entirely out of solid geometric cubes, so that the 3D world would feel more alien and less real to the player.

- *The Self & Its Shadows*

Figure 2



A picture I took in the library of The Self & Its Shadows' cover

Mulhall, S. (2016) *The Self and its Shadows: A book of essays on individuality as negation in philosophy and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The reason why I list The Self & Its Shadows as an inspiration is entirely superficial. I found the cover of the book to be visually striking; a dominant darkness that's obstructed by an enormous eye on a wall, staring directly at anyone who holds the book in their hand. That inspired me to make my 2D player also be presented through a dominant constantly staring eyeball throughout the sea of abstract 3D geometry. In a 3D world that feels foreign due to its abundance of meaningless shapes, the player's only visual tie to any semblance of reality would be this ever present eye staring directly at them.

Mechanic Inspirations

- *Screenbound feature in Edge Magazine, Shady Part of Me, Toodee and Topdee, A Link Between Worlds, Mario Odyssey, Paper Mario (series)*

These are 6 different examples of games that utilize two different dimensions in conjunction to different effect in completely different ways. I extensively studied all 5 games here as well as the Screenbound feature written in Edge Magazine to see all the different ways people have approached this mechanic and general idea so I can develop my idea in a way that is personal and unique to me.

Case Study - Fez

Fez is an indie game released in 2012, developed by Polytron Corporation. It's considered revolutionary for the way it melds 2D and 3D, even going as far as creating an entirely new engine for the sake of making that vision come to life. The impressive technology was going to be the main angle I would tackle for this case study, until I got deeper into Fez and realized that past the melding of 2D and 3D, the game is a masterclass in the exploration of subjective reality and the connection between game and player.

In the very first part of the game, there's an old man who imparts optional dialogue that concisely summarizes the entire core ethos of Fez, "Reality is perception. Perception is subjective." (Polytron Corporation, 2012) This subjectivity of perception is felt on a basic level through the core premise of its mechanics, rotating a 2D world in a 3D manner to change the player's perception of the environments presented to them. However, that is but a minimal facet of Fez's exploration of perception and reality. The game contains 64 cubes in total to collect, 32 regular cubes and 32 anticubes. The regular cubes require superficial engagement with the game, and can be acquired through the simple act of exploration and platforming. On the other hand, anticubes require the player to engage with Fez on a more existential level that challenges their perception of the barrier between their reality and the fictional game in front of them.

Examples of tasks the game requires the player to accomplish for an anticube includes but are not limited to: going to the achievements list and copying a code that's left in one of the descriptions, scanning a QR code and entering the pattern it returns, receiving a code through vibrations on your controller, requiring the player to decode and learn entire numerical, linguistic and cipher systems, and going into your device settings and changing the time and date. The transition from regular cubes to anticubes completely transforms Fez from a delightful and novel platforming experience, to this existential abstract experience that exists beyond the bounds of the game you're playing. It manages to impose itself onto not only onto the digital medium that it exists through, but also onto your actual physical reality. Speaking from personal experience, when I played the latter half of Fez, my desk was filled with paper by necessity, as I had to make an abundance of notes for decoding, translation, solving certain dimensionally oriented puzzles, writing down certain codes that I obtained or translated, and much more. Those papers are a physical manifestation of Fez's intrusion into my reality, however, it manages to go a single step beyond that as well. There are two codes in particular in Fez that are quite literally impossible to solve using any conventional methods. The only possible way to solve them is through brute-forcing or data-mining, which pushes Fez one step further from a game that breaks into the singular observer's reality, and instead into an entire collective's reality, requiring the player to actively interact with other players' findings due to the impossibility of finding it on their own. However, none of what I said is required, in fact, a majority of players could very easily finish their time with the game without encountering any of it.

Circling back to the existence of 32 regular cubes and 32 anticubes, Fez is made to be beaten after collecting 32 cubes in total, meaning that it is very possible to beat the game solely on a superficial level by collecting just the regular cubes. When re-examining the quote said at the start of the game, the subjective reality of Fez truly begins to shine. Ultimately, Fez engaging with Fez on an existential and

metaphysical level is entirely a choice, and not a requirement. That's the true genius of Fez; the subjectivity of your perception of the game dictates the reality that the game is. If you experience it as a fun novel platformer, then that's what it is to you. If you experience it as a maddening dense puzzler that challenges the very boundary between games and reality, then that's what it is to you. And if your experience is a healthy blend of those two worlds, then that's what Fez is to you.

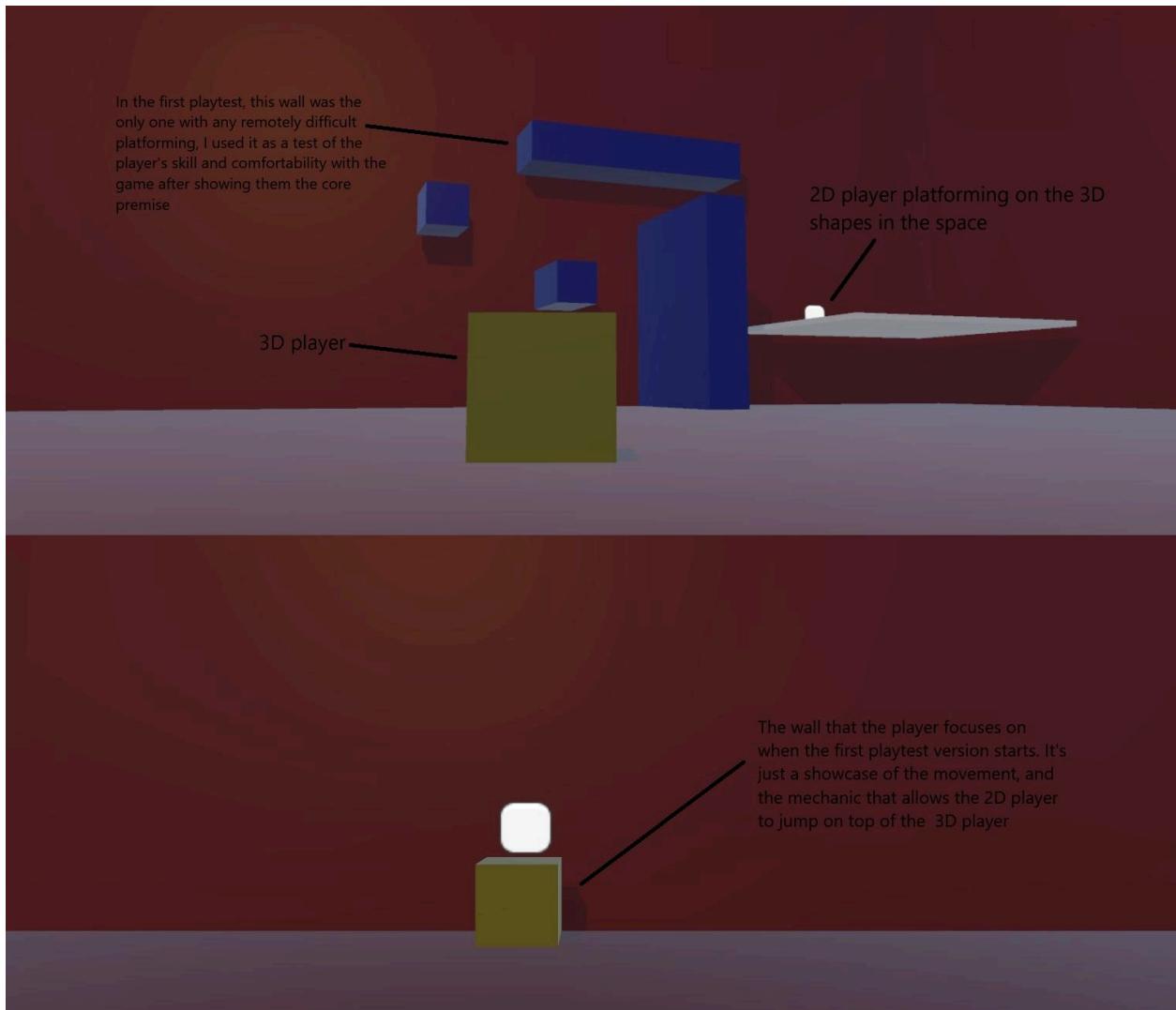
Phil Fish, the creator of Fez states in Indie Game: The Movie, “it’s a game about games,” and then almost paradoxically states, “it’s not just a game, it’s me, it’s my ego, my perception of myself.” (Swirsky and Pajot, 2012) In essence, that’s what Fez is, it’s this philosophical exploration of what games even are, what our roles as players are, what reality even is and the existence or lack thereof of the barrier that exists between fiction and reality.

Design Process

Prior to making the game, I already had a solid idea of what I wanted, which was the blend of 2D, 3D, controller and dance-pad. However, how that would manifest in terms of explorative space, mechanics, narrative and technology was the real question. As the narrative design process was covered extensively in the prior sections, I will mainly concern myself with the mechanics and technology here.

Before even creating anything in Unity I was thinking about how to actually present the 2D and 3D characters. My first two ideas were a split screen, and a base 3D game with a button that toggles the 2D character on and off, however, both those choices were too disjoined. After scrapping those two ideas, I came to the framework of the game as it currently exists.

Figure 3



Screenshots of the version of my game that was present for the first playtesting session.

The first playtest session I had for the game featured a simple proof of concept, with 4 players adorning each wall, without the ability to move through walls and minimal platforming. The novelty of the game

attracted many people with a lot of excitement despite the lack of substance or polish, which immediately checked off my first aim. The most notable playtesting feedback was the following:

- Every player without fail tried to move between walls, despite it not being a mechanic yet.
- Players found it very difficult to do platforming on a dance pad, but got used to it after a bit
- There was a lot of jittery movement, collisions, and awkward camera controls.

After that first playtest session, I continued developing the game, removing three of the 2D players, in favor of one that can move across all 4 walls. I also fixed most of the awkward movement and camera controls and in time for the 2nd playtest, I added significantly more substance to the environmental layout.

Figure 4



Screenshots of the version of my game that was present for the 2nd playtesting session.

The 2nd playtest session contained a fully fledged realization of my game, with an updated and potentially finalized aesthetic, and significantly more in depth exploration and platforming. In order to maximize the simultaneous 2D and 3D exploration, I had a few instances of perspective tricks in the space that the player would have to explore on a 3D level to figure out. On top of that, there's a branching path early in the level, one path is the way to the goal, while the other is a red herring. In order for the player to efficiently figure out which path to go, they would have to look around the space with the 3D player to see which route would lead to the goal. I got the following playtest feedback in this version.

- It took people a long time to beat the game, upwards of 15 minutes, despite my capability to complete it in around 2 minutes.
- The novelty of the game overrode any interest the players had to decode the presented narrative, and the abstraction of that narrative did not help matters.
- Someone suggested that since the 2D player was a giant eyeball, it should have the ability to look back at the 3D player the way the 3D player looks at it, which is an ingenious narrative addition.
- The 2D player should have a back that extends for the sake of visual clarity.

I am yet to implement changes based on this playtest, but I noticed that they were more in depth and valuable than the first playtest, which is a very good sign for the game's evolution.

Critical Reflection

In totality, I am very happy with the game that I created, I feel like I accomplished my aims in interesting ways, with playtesting revealing that players are truly excited about the game's novelty, and the space is dynamic in its exploration with the simultaneous use of 2D and 3D required to explore the space. However there's one exception, that being narrative. While I have a narrative that is told entirely through concept and environment, it's one that is so abstract that I worry that I'm the only person who really comprehends the messages I'm trying to deliver. The conundrum at hand is whether to compromise subtlety and atmosphere to make the message and narrative more overt, or simply accept that with art comes the possibility and inevitability of your audience not receiving your message, and that's okay. When looking back at Fez, I lean to leaving my narrative as is, as the act of not knowing the narrative is a part of the narrative I'm presenting. If the narrative was universal, then it wouldn't be a game about subjective reality, furthermore, even if the narrative isn't received, the novelty and enjoyment of the game is enough to create a satisfying play experience for players. However, what I will do next, is to simply build upon my abstract narrative while leaving it abstract, adding more elements to it without taking away from its subjectivity and interpretability.

Reference List

- Bithell, M. (2012) *Thomas Was Alone*. [Video game]. Published by Bithell Games. PC.
- ditzribi (2021) *Toodee and Topdee*. [Video game]. Self-published. Itch.io. <https://ditzribi.itch.io/toodee-and-topdee>
- Douze Dixièmes (2020) *Shady Part of Me*. [Video game]. Published by Focus Home Interactive. PC.
- Edge: The Future of Interactive Entertainment* (2024) ‘Matters of Perspective’, 1 November.
- GoodbyeWorld Games (2021) *Before Your Eyes*. [Video game]. Published by Skybound Games. PC.
- Intelligent Systems (2004) *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door*. [Video game]. Published by Nintendo. Nintendo GameCube.
- Miller, C.H. (2020) *Digital Storytelling: A creator’s guide to interactive entertainment*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Mulhall, S. (2016) *The Self and its Shadows: A book of essays on individuality as negation in philosophy and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nintendo (2013) *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*. [Video game]. Developed by Grezzo and Nintendo EPD. Published by Nintendo. Nintendo 3DS.
- Nintendo (2017) *Super Mario Odyssey*. [Video game]. Published by Nintendo. Nintendo Switch.
- Per Barclay speaks with Judicael Lavrador* Stephen Sutton (2008). galeria Olivia Arauna, Madrid: La Fabrica and Fundacion Telefonica.
- Polytron Corporation (2012) *Fez*. [Video game]. Published by Trapdoor. PC.
- Swirsky, L. and Pajot, J. (2012) *Indie Game: The Movie*. [Film]. Produced by BlinkWorks Media.
- Wiesing, L. and Roth, N.A. (2016) *The philosophy of perception: Phenomenology and image theory*. London: Bloomsbury.